

## The Monster on the Sidewalk

By

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He spent his summer Sunday morning laying on the couch and binge-watching some cable show he'd missed while working 15-hour days, six days a week for the last eleven months. Never again, he thought . . . at least not until the next financial shitstorm and we're both laid.

But this was no time for worrying; it was time for steak and eggs, for a third cold beer, and watching a middle-aged chemistry teacher fail upward into a drug empire.

A streak of black and pink became his wife standing next to the television. Though she wore running clothes she was not all sweaty.

She looked disturbed.

He said, "I thought you left."

"I did. There's something I need you to do."

He waited for the rest of it.

"Look, I'm sorry. I tried. I thought I could do it. It's your day off and—"

"It's fine," he said and meant it.

She closed her eyes and gripped her forehead. "There's a dead baby bird on the sidewalk behind the garage."

Holy Jesus, he thought. Is that all?

He appreciated the attempt, or at least the intention, of taking care of it herself. When they'd first started dating, she'd been squeamish about everything: ants, worms, mosquitoes, public bathrooms, public transportation. She'd also refused to get into any body of water she couldn't see the bottom of because, "what's really down there?" She'd slowly come around until she was dealing with all sorts of bugs and messes. She still didn't like it—who the hell did?—but she approached them as a matter of course because he hadn't been around to take care of them for her.

But now he was home and there was a dead baby bird . . . and it was OK.

He told her he'd take care of it. She said, "Oh, thank God," gave him a quick kiss then left by the front door.

He told her to be careful, locked the door behind her, then went to the kitchen for a plastic grocery bag.

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Late-summer humidity weighed down everything, especially the air under the trees by the patio and garage. The day was still relatively coolish, though wouldn't be for long, which was fine with him. Killer heat and humidity were two more reasons to enjoy his time on the couch.

He was set to deploy the old trick for picking up dog poop: use a plastic grocery bag like a glove to grab the dead bird, pull the bag off his hand with the bird inside it then tie the bag shut.

Except this wasn't a dead bird.

It was clearly dead . . . but also, clearly not a bird.

The body was two-inches long, not counting the tail, fleshy—white and perfectly hairless. Four limbs extended from the body but it was impossible to tell if they were arms or legs because they ended in something that may have been a hand or a foot. Each digit seemed strangely jointed and had a delicate claw the color of fiberglass.

How could she think this thing was a bird?

She must have glanced at it, saw the hairless body, and her brain filled in the most likely thing to find dead under a tree in a suburban backyard. It was the only explanation.

He picked it up with the bag and brought it to the patio. It was even uglier in full sunlight.

Areas of skin were callused and had the look of scales. Then there was the thing's face—or the lack of one. Where its mouth and nose should have been was a vertical gap of stringy meat and ragged flesh. If it had been born with eyes, those were gone, too.

Something had chewed its face off.

He stood there holding the dead creature, his arm tiring, his brain gummed with indecision.

Take it to the cops?

Give it to the zoo?

Drop it down the sewer?

Bury it?

Burn it . . . ?

Until he figured it out, he'd wrap the thing in the bag, seal it in an old plastic container, duct tape the lid on, and hide it behind the beer bottles cooling in the garage refrigerator so his wife wouldn't find it.

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He'd just put back the last row of bottles when his sweaty wife ran into the garage and gave him a salty kiss.

“Hi, sailor. Thanks for taking care of the body.”

He nearly told her what he'd found. Instead, he slapped her ass and followed her in the house.

She either didn't notice or didn't mention the dead breakfast in front of the TV. His eggs and hash browns were a coagulated mess, the steak and beer total losses. He shut off the TV and half-heartedly cleaned the kitchen before opening his laptop. The rest of the first day of his first weekend off in nearly a year was spent on the internet, searching for the monster.

It didn't take long to go from news sites to kooky news sites to just plain kook sites. Chupacabras, the Montauk Monster, Plum Island, mutations . . . Human-zees, chimeras, and other trans-species hybrids . . . mouse/human gene splicing for better bioresearch; Charles Ripley, Charles Fort, cryptozoology—all of it one long, dark, and often horrifying rabbit hole that seemed to have no end.

Which was fine with him. From what he remembered, Alice's trip down the rabbit hole was just the start. Things got exponentially weirder after she hit bottom.

A bottle of beer materialized on the end table. When it was empty, another appeared, often accompanied by a kiss on the forehead or delicate fingers raking his hair. A plate of pretzels and sliced cheese came from somewhere. Then he had to pee again.

In the dark kitchen, the stove clock glowed 10:13. Where the hell had the day gone? And the night, for that matter? A Las Vegas magnet held a note to the microwave.

*Went to the movies. Home by 10:30.*

*XO*

*P.S. — Check the fridge.*

Inside the refrigerator was a perfect ham sandwich sealed in a sandwich-sized container.

He wished his wife was there.

After all the reading and all the research, he was still no closer what that thing might be, let alone what to do with it. His wife might not know either, but at least she'd help him figure it out. He should have shown it to her. She wouldn't have been thrilled but she'd still want to see it after hearing it wasn't a dead bird.

Back in the garage, he hit the button to open the door for his wife then knelt to exhume the plastic coffin from behind the beers. Kneeling in front of the open refrigerator, he stripped off the tape, popped the lid and untied the bag.

Jesus, he thought. It was uglier than he remembered.

Loading the beer back on the shelf, he thought about pictures. Why hadn't he taken any? That should have been the first thing he'd done. Post them online, let social media tell him what it was. Why not? Get a few billion ill-informed screwballs to chime in with their opinions, jackass commentary, and an avalanche of 'Likes.'

The thing's goddamned face had been chewed off—what was there to like about that?

No . . . he'd keep it to himself. When the thing turned out to be a baby opossum, he'd feel privately foolish instead of internationally stupid.

He put away the last of the beer, swung closed the refrigerator and nearly backed into the nightmare behind him.

It was the size and shape of a Great Dane, dark skin sliding over heavy muscles and around thick patches of scales. Three of its weird hand-feet splayed on the garage floor, the fourth poised to gut him with obsidian claws. The outsized head had the same eyeless meathole as the thing in the plastic box he held—a dead relative of the half-dozen hairless, faceless babies clinging to the hide of the monster in his garage.

Afraid to take his eyes off of it, afraid to even think, he eased the container to the cement floor then pushed it forward with his toe. The container slid a few feet before tipping over and covering the bag. Still not thinking, he reached for the container but the monster moved first, flicking it away with a claw.

The thing brought its face to the plastic bag and a mass of smooth, pasta-like tentacles slid from the awful hole. They felt around, assessing the bag, but unable to get inside. The monster's agitation grew until its claws slashed the plastic and the thing inside fell out.

The tentacles touched the body and recoiled. They found it again, fluttered around and over it with great and gentle care. Then the tentacles withdrew.

The beast's hackles rose and its babies scabbled to hide near its belly. The monster raised its eyeless head while the skin and tentacles of its ragged maw bloomed into a vicious black beak set in a ring of serrated teeth. The tentacles thrashed the air, savoring his fear.

He thought, *That's it. I'm dead.*

Oh, sure—the garage was full of weapons: An axe, two hatchets, shovels, lawnmower blades, a garden trowel—hell, even a bicycle pump would do—but he couldn't get to any of it because the monster blocked his way.

The light on the garage door opener timed out putting everything in half-darkness. The creature stalked forward. He stepped back and banged against the refrigerator. He eased his hand up to grip the handle, filled with the insane Hollywood vision of using the refrigerator door as a shield or slamming it against the monster's spine a few times then diving for the axe.

The monster jumped and he jumped as light and noise filled the garage and the double-wide door started rolling down its rails. It stopped, hitched open, hitched forward, then open again as halogen light and music blasted up the driveway.

The monster lunged, head and mouth striking down, face tentacles snatching up its dead child before leaping onto his car and into the night.

He sprang for the button to shut the garage door, kept pushing it until his wife's car was all the way in, then signaled for her to stay exactly where she was. He knew the thing was gone, but only after the door was down and he'd checked the garage would he let her out.

When he opened her car door, she kissed him for it.

She wanted to know whose dog that was. He said he had no idea.

"It just came in the garage like that?"

He shrugged and watched her trace the gouges in the roof and trunk of his car.

"We should find out who owns it, babe — 'cuz your car is scuh-ratched."

Really seeing him for the first time that night, she asked, "Are you OK? Did you eat?"

She made a face when he told her no, said she'd make him some eggs to go with his sandwich, then headed in the house.

"Did you find what you were looking for on the internet?"

"Hmm . . . no."

She smiled. "The truth is out there. You coming?"

"In a minute."

She went inside.

With his arms shoved into a heavy-duty garbage bag, he picked up the plastic container, its lid, the torn duct tape, and the shreds of the grocery bag, then folded and refolded it all into a tight package. He wrapped it in layers of fresh tape then put it in the freezer until the morning when he'd drive all the way to the office and toss it in one of their Dumpsters.

After that, he'd spend the second day of his first weekend off in nearly a year scrubbing the garage floor and sidewalk with industrial cleaning chemicals then trying to figure out what to do with his car.

One thing he was sure of, though, was that the next time something decided to die on his sidewalk, it would damn-well stay there to rot.